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SUBJECT: NEW JORDANIAN WEEKLY STRESSES ITC INDEPENDENCE

Classified By: Ambassador David Hale for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: A new Jordanian weekly newspaper known for running feature stories and investigative reports, al-Sijjl ("The Record"), hit newsstands in November, 2007. Al-Sijjl's executive managing editor told us recently that his publication aims to provide an alternative to a Jordanian press that he criticized as ineffective. Stating that "the Jordanian people are fed up with how news is covered in Jordan," he said that al-Sijjl aims to report news objectively, avoiding both sensationalism and excessive praise for the king and the GOJ. With its circulation rising to roughly 36,000 each week in less than four months, al-Sijjl's directors hope that they can increase their popularity with their target market of Jordanian intellectuals and opinion-makers "by making sure we address what is important to the average reader, the common person, in our reporting." END SUMMARY.

NEW WEEKLY: "WE LOOK AT WHAT IS BEHIND THE NEWS"

2. (C) Saad Hattar, the Executive Managing Editor of Jordan's newest major weekly newspaper, told us recently that al-Sijjl is hoping to fill a void in the Jordanian media market by focusing on objectivity and accuracy. "We are different from other newspapers, and our weapon is accuracy," Hattar said. Harshly criticizing the rest of Jordan's media for being ineffective and prone to sensationalism and effusive praise for the GOJ, Hattar said Jordanians are "fed up" with their media. Explaining that the newspaper runs feature stories and investigative stories, Hattar said his newspaper distinguishes itself by "looking at what is behind the news."

3. (C) Al-Sijjl first hit newsstands in Jordan in November, 2007. The weekly newspaper is published in Amman by the al-Mada press and media group. While declining to name the newspaper's financiers, Hattar described them as "a group of young businessmen." He stressed that the newspaper's stakeholders are not involved in "editorial policy or judgment." The newspaper's editorial board is chaired by Mustafa Hamarneh, former head of the Political and Strategic Studies Centre of the University of Jordan and the former Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Jordan Television Corporation. Hattar said that "some businessmen who run factories met with Mustafa Hamarneh to address issues that concerned all of them. They raised the funds that would run the newspaper." Hattar added that he is confident that his newspaper's current funding will ensure its viability "for at least two years."

4. (C) Al-Sijjl has recruited several prominent local journalists, including Chief Editor Mahmud al-Rimmawi, to its staff. In the paper's first few months, al-Sijjl's investigative stories have included reporting on the problems of public transport and incompetence among public sector employees. Hattar said the newspaper is currently investigating a report that UAE-based Etihad Airlines recently nearly missed colliding with another plane upon landing at Amman's Queen Alia Airport. "In the past, we have heard of air traffic controllers at the airport who are not doing their jobs, who are talking on the phone or praying and not paying attention," Hattar explained. Criticizing the tendency of other Jordanian newspapers to report rumors, Hattar stressed that the newspaper would not run the story on Etihad Airlines until they had corroborated the story with at least two witnesses.

5. (C) The newspaper also runs feature stories on a wide

variety of political, economic, and social issues. Its latest issue features a story on Jordanian young people who are flocking to jobs at American fast food outlets. The article concludes that economic necessity means that Jordanians are no longer "ashamed" of working in these types of food service jobs, which in the past carried a social stigma. Al-Sijjl has also criticized GOJ decisions in its articles, including a decision by the GOJ to exact punishment against public employees who give government documents to the media that are "harmful to Jordan." It also recently took to task parliamentarians who have not regularly been attending committee meetings.

#### NEW WEEKLY STRESSES "MODERATE AND LIBERAL" EDITORIAL POLICY

16. (C) Al-Sijjl's editorial board characterizes its editorial policy as "moderate" and "liberal." Hamarneh, a long-time leftist stalwart in Jordan and a (losing) candidate in the November 2007 parliamentary election for a Christian seat from Madaba, is quoted in newspapers as stating that the publication wishes to reflect "an enlightened democratic trend" in Jordan. Hattar added that the newspaper strives for balance, while promoting "international standards of

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liberalism." He distinguished the paper's liberalism from "neo-liberals," whom he characterized as free market enthusiasts who are not properly taking into account the challenges price hikes and inflation are posing to Jordan's people. Hattar claimed that "the neo-liberals currently hold the most influence in the royal court," and said al-Sijjl's features will continue to highlight economic problems caused by "neo-liberal fiscal policy."

17. (C) In explaining the rationale behind al-Sijjl's creation, Hattar took the Jordanian media to task for competing amongst themselves in showering the King and leading GOJ officials with praise. Hattar said that effusive praise of the monarch by the Jordanian media "is actually hurting the King," and surmised that the King does not himself seek such praise. He expressed concern that the Jordanian media are losing the respect of the population, and that their resulting lack of legitimacy constitutes a challenge to Jordan's political and economic stability.

18. (C) Hattar said he sees "an axis of problems" confronting Jordan, with the media's ineffectiveness and lack of legitimacy within the country foremost among them. The second set of problems is socio-economic, linked to the fiscal policies of "neo-liberals," and includes recent price hikes and rising inflation. The final set of problems facing Jordan are "external, like the peace process in Palestine and the situation in Lebanon and Iraq." Hattar stated that this "axis" presents a "real threat in the short term" to Jordan's stability. The newspaper attempts to address these "threats" through its investigative features. In each issue, the newspaper opens a file on a topic of interest to Jordanians. Addressing Jordan's economic problems in its February 28 issue, al-Sijjl opened a "file on poverty" taking a critical look at Jordan's social safety net. The paper editorialized that despite increasing spending on social welfare programs, the number of poor and hungry Jordanians is still increasing.

19. (C) "The neo-liberals and their policies will eventually fail," Hattar concluded. "The question is what will replace them," he added, expressing concern that a conservative "old guard" would fill any void left by the free market enthusiasts currently in power. According to Hattar, promoting the development of an effective, independent media that accurately reports on the challenges facing Jordan will help the country tackle the challenges facing it. He concluded that newspapers like al-Sijjl can play a role in that development.

10. (C) COMMENT: Barely four months old, al-Sijjl is one of the newest players on the Jordanian media scene. It is already differentiating itself from other newspapers, however, with its focus on investigative journalism and its willingness to criticize the government. Some Embassy media contacts describe al-Sijjl as "raising issues others are not." The newspaper's editorial board describes itself as "liberal and democratic," but observers will be looking to see if Hamarneh's leftist past influences the tone of al-Sijjl's coverage. (Note: Hamarneh's leftist politics are behind him, but he still has a talent for generating controversy, even acrimony. He resigned from the leadership

of Jordan,s leading strategic studies center in order to run for parliamentary elections in November 2007. Having lost the race, he is now looking for- and seems to have found- a new platform. END NOTE).

11. (C) While al-Sijjl's editorial board focuses on the economic challenges facing Jordan, the newspaper's own success will likely also hinge on economics. Although Hattar claims the newspaper will be economically viable for at least two years, little is known about the businessmen funding the newspaper. Their ability to continue to finance the new weekly as it attempts to establish itself in the Jordanian media market will be critical to its success. In the meantime, al-Sijjl's focus on independent and accurate reporting is a positive step in the development of an effective, independent media in Jordan. END COMMENT.

HALE